

# UN Security Council imposes harsh US-sponsored sanctions on North Korea

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The UN Security Council voted unanimously on Wednesday for a resolution to impose draconian new sanctions on North Korea that will intensify the country's economic and social crisis. The vote will greatly heighten tensions on the Korean Peninsula and throughout the region. In apparent retaliation for the sanctions, the North Korean military reportedly fired six missiles into the sea within hours of the UN vote. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un declared Friday that the country's nuclear weapons had to be "ready for use."

The resolution was passed as South Korea and the US are about to begin huge annual joint military exercises and as the US intensifies its confrontation with China over Beijing's activities in the South China Sea. The resolution was the outcome of weeks of talks between the US and China, in which Beijing was strong-armed into accepting harsh penalties on Pyongyang over its fourth nuclear test in January and rocket launch last month. Hanging over the Chinese regime was the prospect of unilateral US sanctions voted by Congress and approved by Obama last month that penalise not only North Korea but entities and individuals doing business with it. China is by far North Korea's largest trading partner, accounting for an estimated 75 percent of its total trade.

Having bowed to US demands, Beijing will undoubtedly come under pressure from Washington to take further action against Pyongyang. The sweeping scope of the resolution provides the US with broad scope for accusing China of not living up to its word and failing to rein in its only formal ally in Asia. Setting the tone, US ambassador to the UN Samantha Power hailed the measures as "comprehensive, robust and unyielding" and insisted that their enforcement had to be the same.

The measures include:

- \* UN member states are required to inspect all cargo passing through their territory via land, sea or air, either going to or coming from North Korea, for banned items.

- \* A ban on North Korean exports of gold, titanium ore, vanadium ore and rare earth minerals.

- \* A ban on North Korean exports of coal, iron and iron ore and on sales of oil to North Korea unless they are for "livelihood purposes."

- \* A ban on all sales of weapons, including small arms and conventional weapons, to North Korea, as well as on virtually all aviation fuel, including "kerosene-type rocket fuel."

- \* The list of banned luxury items has been extended to upmarket watches, watercraft, snowmobiles and other recreational sports equipment. North Korean personnel are prohibited from any involvement in military and police training programs in other countries.

- \* UN member states are obliged, rather than encouraged, to freeze the financial assets of companies and other entities linked to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs. Another 16 individuals and 12 organisations have been blacklisted.

- \* North Korean diplomats accused of carrying out illicit activities are to be expelled.

The bans on North Korean exports have the potential to precipitate an economic collapse and political implosion in Pyongyang. Minerals account for 53 percent of North Korea's \$2.5 billion in exports to China, which is also the chief supplier of oil to North Korea. Pressure will be brought to bear on Beijing by Washington from day one to ensure that for "livelihood purposes"—i.e., not for the military—is interpreted in the narrowest sense.

As in the case of Iran, Washington has insisted on crippling economic sanctions on North Korea while preparing for war. Due to start on March 5, the annual US-South Korean war games—Foal Eagle and Key Resolve—involve hundreds of thousands of troops backed by sophisticated weaponry. This year, for the first time, the exercises are premised on a new Operational Plan 5015 agreed last year, which includes pre-emptive strikes on North Korean military positions and the assassination of top officials, and the seizure of the whole Korean Peninsula.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the end of the Cold War, the US has exploited the supposed threat of North Korea to justify the continued presence of American military bases in South Korea and Japan. Now the Obama administration is deliberately inflaming tensions on the Korean Peninsula to justify its military build-up in North East Asia as part of its “pivot to Asia” which is directed against China. The US has begun formal negotiations with South Korea for the installation of a Terminal High-Altitude Asia Defence (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile system, designed to block any Chinese response to a US or South Korean attack.

The South Korean parliament on Wednesday further inflamed relations with North Korea by passing legislation establishing a human rights centre that would collect, publish and archive human rights abuses in North Korea with a view to punishing violators in the event of a reunification of the two Koreas. While North Korea is certainly a brutal police-state regime, its counterpart in Seoul is increasingly resorting to the methods of previous South Korean military dictatorships: banning opposition parties, strike action and protests, and persecuting political opponents.

The Chinese government has agreed to the sanctions demanded by the US in the hope of staving off even tougher unilateral measures. Beijing also hopes to prevent the deployment of a THAAD system in South Korea and pressure North Korea to return to talks. China’s ambassador to the UN, Liu Jieyi, declared: “Sanctions are not an end to themselves and the Security Council cannot fundamentally resolve the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula.” He called for the resolution to be “a paving stone for the political settlement of the nuclear issue.”

Since its installation in 2009, the Obama

administration has never shown the slightest inclination for the resumption of the previous six-party talks, sponsored by Beijing, to resolve the confrontation over North Korea’s nuclear programs. Washington has always made clear that any talks would be on its terms and involve major prior concessions by Pyongyang.

Beijing has opposed Pyongyang’s nuclear tests. It fears they provide a justification not only for the US military expansion in Asia, but also could be seized on by Japan and South Korea as the pretext for constructing nuclear weapons. At the same time, the Chinese leadership fears that a collapse of the Pyongyang regime could open the way for direct intervention by the South Korean military, backed by the US, leading to the establishment of a unified Korea aligned with Washington.

Far from resolving the standoff with North Korea, the latest UN sanctions have set the stage for a dangerous confrontation that has the potential to trigger a devastating conflict involving nuclear-armed powers.



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